

Cabrera Brothers

NOV-DEC 2021

FREE BUNDLE

FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION

Sarah Richman

Paul Lubaczewski

Melissa Olisse

Jeff Fields McCormack

Eleftheria Tsichli

JB Granger

Javier Cabrera



The Journey

by Eleftheria Tsichli

Includes DEMON KEEPER, a new Abraham Van Helsing--Eradicator story

DOG

DRAW ME UGLY,
AND I'LL HAVE
TO GET UGLY



WIN A DOG MINI-BUST!

A MINI-BUST? YES! A MINI-BUST!

With every new issue of the Free Bundle, we like to give something extra to our readers. This time we asked Dog to give us a hand. Because it was for you, he said yes and spent a full day in our offices helping our sculptors with a very unique surprise: a mini-bust!

Here's the deal

What you have to do is simple: using our webcomic as a guide, take your favorite pencils, pens or digital tablet and draw your own Dogerón "Dog" Kenan. Send your version to our mailroom. Every issue, the artist with the most creative, original, and cool piece will win these fine...

FANTASTIC PRIZES!

Grand Prize (1)

One lucky dog will win an original Dogerón DOG Kenan cold-cast porcelain bust from our upcoming video game codenamed "CYPHER 2" signed by no other than the Cabrera Brothers. Dog himself modeled for this mini-bust!

First Prize (10)

Ten almost-lucky dogs will get an original Dogerón DOG Kenan art piece from DOG's current comic run, signed (of course) by the Cabrera Brothers.

Cabrera Brothers

NOV-DEC 2021

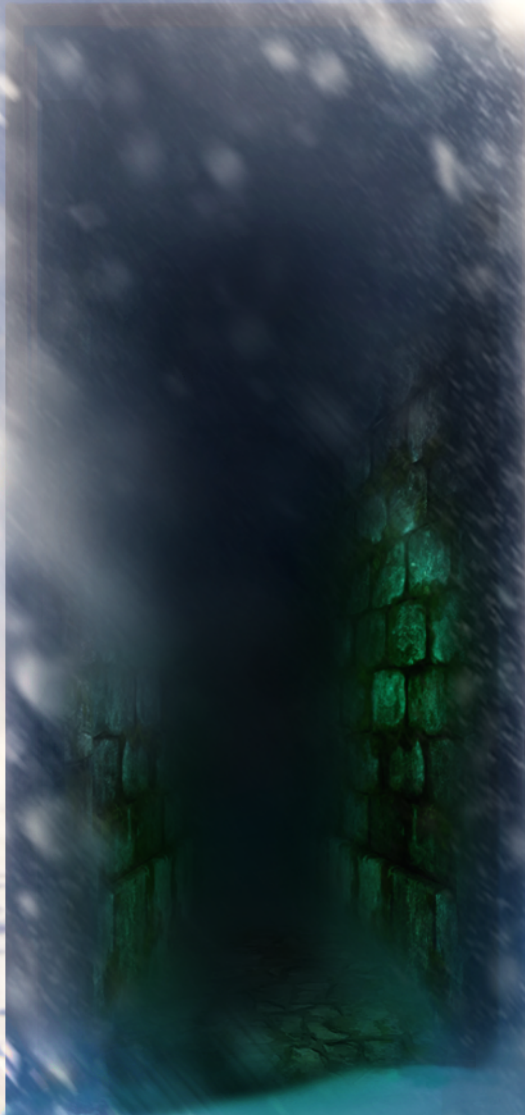
FREE BUNDLE

FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION



VARIANT COVER

Get ready, you go next.



THROUGH
THE GATES OF
MADNESS

Cabrera Brothers

FREE BUNDLE ORIGINALS

Cabrera Brothers

FREE BUNDLE

FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION

Editor: Javier Cabrera

Art: Carlos Cabrera, Javier Cabrera

#THEFREEBUNDLE

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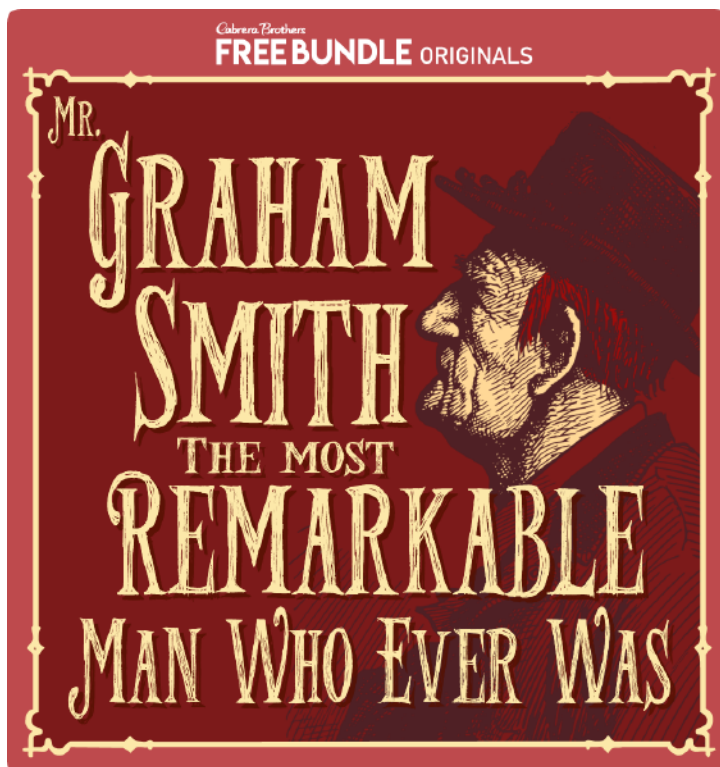
Hallowed Ground, by Sarah Richman. Demon
Keeper, by Javier Cabrera. Behind Those Eyes,
by Paul Lubaczewski. Have You Tried Turning It
Off and Turning it Back On? By Melissa Olisse.
Incinerating Mr. Six, by Jeff Fields McCormack.
The Journey, by Eleftheria Tsihli. To Shorten
the Way, by JB Granger. Some authors requested
to have their biography displayed.

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TRANSFIGURATIONS

You are reading the last issue of Free Bundle Magazine. This number marks the end for us, but a new beginning as well. Since its inception, we have not been quite happy with the name, as it says nothing about us or about the stories we publish, other than they are free and come in a bundle. Not much to go on, really. The problem comes, I admit, from having started as a venture that helped independent game developers to reach new audiences. Thus, the description was accurate back then, if only for a few years. We tried our best to maintain and accommodate things around the Free Bundle brand for as long as we possibly could, but it was simply not to be.

And while changing the magazine's name might be all that's needed to move forward, we want to take this opportunity to push things even further. We want to spread our wings and fly as high as possible to attract a broader audience of readers. That is why, starting next year, we will begin with an entire revamp of the magazine and its website. What we will become then, when we finally emerge from our chrysalis in January 2022?

Stay around and find out.



Javier Cabrera
Editor



Hallowed Ground

By Sarah Richman

Sarah Richman is a writer, author, and poet based in Washington, DC, where she helps run a magic shop. Her work is published across the United States and Scotland. Sarah loves traveling, gardens, and a good slice of cheese. You can learn more about her at sarahrichmanwriter.com or visit her on Twitter at [@itssarahrichman](https://twitter.com/itssarahrichman)

ON your left—there, next to the sock—you'll find one of the most important artifacts in the collection. We've traced its history back to the very night it arrived in the house, although our experts still don't know exactly where it came from.

There's so much that we don't know about the Orb. We do know this: its contents were delicious.

Can anyone tell me what it might have been like, after eight aching days and eight hollow nights without a crumb of food, to get your mandibles on an entire chocolate bar?

You, in the back?

Absolutely. Bliss.

It was even better than that, though. Upon inspection, our ancestors discovered that it had a handle they could climb up, and an open top. Inside, according to our records, they found seven chocolate bars, two candy corns, three peanut butter cups, nine loose hard candies, and half of a caramel apple.

Scuttle this way, young ones, and you'll notice the dark markings on this side of the Orb. Right here, three smaller marks and one larger one. There is much debate over what they might mean.

Some scholars say that the markings were made to resemble a Large One's face. Others suggest that they are scuff marks from another species, stronger and kinder, that insisted on leaving the Orb for us so that we could live. Others still argue that they mean nothing at all.

Yes? A little louder, please.

What do I think, you ask?

I've been coming to look at the Orb since I was your age, barely out of my egg case, asking myself that question.

Before the Orb, our people were starving. The Large Ones had scoured this place bare. They had trapped our neighbors and our friends by the nest-

ful. They had poisoned our air.

Yet, somehow, this bounty still came. They could have taken it from us, but they didn't. Now here we are.

I don't know what the Orb or its markings mean, but I do know how they make me feel. They make me feel hope. This giant world is full of cruelty, but when I look up at this...well...there is still room for small, sweet miracles.

There is still room for us.

Fantastic work Vanessa Anne!

Thank You!

Vanessa was a pleasure to work with! She immediately understood the part and gave us one of the best performances we could have possibly asked for.

Many voice-over talents merely read the script, but few have integrated acting skills into their tool-set. Vanessa is a natural; she delivers the kind of performance you would expect from a seasoned actress, and she's just starting out! We are definitely booking her again in the future!

<https://www.castingcall.club/m/velmaisbest>



ABRAHAM VAN HELSING---ERADICATOR

Demon Keeper

Javier Cabrera is a novelist, short story writer, essayist and screenwriter working in a variety of genres including horror, science fiction, fantasy, and mystery. He is also the co-founder and the active CEO of Cabrera Brothers, a media and entertainment company and the editor of the Free Bundle Magazine, a modern-day Fantasy & Science Fiction Magazine.

by Javier Cabrera

<https://javiercabrerabooks.com>

WHEN Sahib Jabbar got off the elevator on the 19th floor of the Hilton Tower Bridge, he caught the thick double glass windows to his left explode only by chance. He had thrown a quick glance to his wristwatch to make sure he was on time and saw a distant glare flashing amid the misty city's skyline.

A moment later, a thousand knives flung past him, gashing half of his cheek open on their way into the hallway and leaving a dangling string of pulpy meat where his ear had been.

One of the bodyguards from the security firm the cult of the Jorodowskys had insisted on hiring prior arriving England for their meeting had pushed Sahib just before the high caliber bullet broke through the window. Death missed the old Arab businessman by only a fraction of a second, and he couldn't have been more pissed about it. One instant, that is all he was given after years of blind servitude. A single, insignificant moment that accounted for even less than a second.

The bodyguard, a middle-aged man from Boston who did not have the kind of deal Sahib had but a more traditional one—the type that gets signed with ink instead of blood—ended up taking the bullet that was meant for him while everyone witnessed in horror how half of the man's skull exploded like a watermelon.

Instinctively, the old Arab threw himself down to the ground almost at the same time his savior's lifeless body slumped over the marble tiles of the hallway like a puppet whose strings had been cut, then proceeded to crawl back into the elevator on all fours, like the dog he was. Seconds later, the thunder came. Far and distant, a single clap mockingly bounced behind every wall

and building that surrounded them, and when it reached the hotel, the late echo of the sniper's gunshot appeared to blow up through the cold morning air like a bomb.

The rest of the Arab's escort, two men who scrambled inside the elevator with him shortly after seeing the mess on the wall and realizing they were being shot at, were still unsure of what was happening.

But Sahib knew. Even though he didn't stop his cowardly crawl to risk it by looking through the window, he knew. The shooter must have been hidden somewhere across the busy Manchester skyline, not far from where they were, probably crouched in the living room of some empty office building he rented specially for the occasion months before the meeting with the Cult had even been arranged.

He wouldn't stop. Not this one. This one was smart and resourceful. As relentless and as ruthless as a hawk stalking its prey. This one was the only one who, in a world of uncertainties, was a bet as sure as death. But the worst of all to Sahib was knowing that, of all the men he had wronged, of all the lives he had consciously ruined only to rejoice in sick complaisance, this man was the only one who held no personal grudge against him, nor seek no justice nor monetary gain from his death. He was, simply put, a force of nature. As inevitable as the last grain of sand that

falls onto the mound and as definitive as the dull clunk of the last movement before a clock's pendulum stops.

"Helsing," Sahib said in a thick Araba accent, almost spitting the name as a curse that felt dirty in his mouth.

The shock of having been shot at had delayed the bleeding long enough for anyone but Sahib to notice the extent and gravity of his wounds, but once his heart began pounding with the realization of the grim predicament he had just walked into, life began oozing out from the frail old man's head as if a faucet had been left open. The youngest of the two bodyguards who were with Sahib tried to use his handkerchief to stop the bleeding, but the Arab slapped the man's hand away in disdain and used the royal-purple pocket square that his Italian tailor had chosen for his double-breasted suit instead.

"That's right, keep the pressure on," the bodyguard said, his voice cracking and wavering. He was a tough-looking young guy, broad across the shoulders and with a thick neck. The security firm used him to impress new clients. Unfortunately, he had spent hours in the gym trying to look like a bodyguard might want to look like rather than in the field, and it was showing.

He swallowed loudly and said, "this is bad, man; Jason just got wasted," as if no one but him had noticed the man's splattered head dripping down the wall on the hallway.

"Keep it together," the other bodyguard said. He was old enough to be retired and had served in the Marine Corps before joining the Secret Service, but got tempted by the sweet honey of the private sector shortly after he was given presidential clearance and never got to run next to someone's limousine.

The younger bodyguard ignored him completely, his eyes had gone too big and round with the image of death to even realize he was standing in front of him, "Oh God, did you see his face on the wall?"

"I did," the bodyguard said. His voice was soft now, but his face had gone rock-hard, "now quit thinking about it and give me a hand here, because it ain't over yet."

It took the young guy a moment, but he finally snapped a quick nod at him.

"Y-Yeah, I'm through."

"Good," the bodyguard said, turning bitterly towards the doors, more upset at having been caught with his pants down than at his partner's reaction. He was, after all, considered among the top five security specialists that money could book, especially internationally. Over the years, most of his assignments had gone from transporting retired generals back and forth the middle east to keeping corporate dogs from getting kidnapped in nightclubs by Latin American militias, though lately, he only seemed to be getting hired to get minor

celebrities in and out of teen-infested shopping malls. Sahib had been a sudden surprise and a one of a kind chance for him to go back to his high-profile clientele, which would have been pretty neat if it wasn't because he was now shaking so bad that he was having a hard time thumbing the hotel's parking lot on the switchboard.

"I didn't hear the shot," he mumbled to himself, "Son of a bitch must be four, five buildings away, and I still couldn't hear it."

He then turned over to Sahib. The old man was a nerve wreck. He was as pale and sweating as a damned on the way to the rope. With his best reassuring voice, the bodyguard leaned over and said, "Don't worry, the shooter must have run the moment he realized he missed. We will get out of here in no time."

The old man's slap came down loud across the bodyguard's cheek, almost knocking him down backward. "He didn't miss, you fool! He wants me to know he is coming!"

The bodyguard staggered back against the corner; it had been some time since someone had landed him that hard and it took him a moment to realize it hadn't been some twenty-year-old punk on the gym's ring trying to show off in front of his friends, but a withered old man who couldn't even straighten his legs to push himself off the ground. Had the old Arab been any other person, he would have slapped him right back,

client or not--but Sahib was injured, and in shock, so the bodyguard kept back and turned to his wrist microphone instead.

"Charly one, this is Stagecoach, shots fired, I repeat, shots fired. We have a code red over here," the old bodyguard said, his voice was low and harsh, "get the car ready and phone the police; we have a shooter. Over." He waited a moment for confirmation, then said, "The VIP is safe, but Jason's gone. Shots fired from the southeast corner. We are in the elevator going your way, stand-by for escape route code alpha, lima sierra, over and out."

The next shot came muffled from somewhere high above them, and they were only able to hear it because when it impacted on the side of the building, it took down part of the wall right into the elevator shaft.

After yanking Sahib towards one of the corners, the bodyguards waited for the debris to finish falling over. Time froze as they stared at the ceiling, waiting for death to come, but the mechanical sounds of the pole slowly sliding them downwards through the shaft was all they got instead.

They kept staring at it anyways as if by doing so, they could somehow get to see through the ceiling and figure out what was happening five floors above them.

"What was that?" The younger bodyguard began in fright, but he was imme-

diately hushed by his partner.

The three stared at each other's eyes, trying to find clues of what had just happened when the distinct sound of exploding bricks going off far above them shook them back into reality. This time, there was not a shred of doubt in any of them. They were gunshots hitting the side of the building. This time around, the debris came down hard, heavier, so much that it shook until its lights began to flicker like a subway's.

Before the battering over their heads had quieted down, another thunder roared far above them, and with it, a new rainfall of loose bricks. This time, big chunks of wall shook them to their knees as part of the elevator roof gave in, showering the inside of the car with a steady stream of debris. Some of the mirrors on the elevator shattered in place; others exploded, giving the impression they were slowly crushed into a crumb by an invisible giant hand.

"Hot damn, what the hell is he shooting at?" The younger guy said.

The older bodyguard was too busy desperately pushing the parking lot button to think about the shooter's strategy, but when he went from thumbing the button to keep it all the way in as if that would somehow speed up their descent, the realization came rushing down to him like a bucket of cold water.

"The cables!" he said, turning to the

others, "He's shooting at the damn cables!"

Sahib shrieked in desperation. Before his bodyguards could stop the elevator, another bomb went off far above his head, followed by a loud metallic snap. When the wooden coffin they were trapped in began to free fall, tilting awkwardly while tripling its speed, panic arose.

Screeching metal. Darkness. The stop was sudden and violent, sending everyone bouncing on a carpet of broken mirrors as more debris came flinging down through the roof.

"Looks like the emergency brakes kicked in," the older bodyguard said to Sahib. The younger one threw himself to the doors as the lights flickered back on, and the reek of burnt metal began to make breathing something impossible without coughing.

"You can't open those from over here," the older one said, but his partner was too focused on finally being able to justify his gym card to listen, so he turned to his wrist-mic instead.

"Charlie one, this is Stagecoach, come in, over," the older bodyguard said while trying to look up through the small hole on the elevator's rooftop without getting brick dust in his eyes. He fiddled with the transmitter on his belt for a while, calmly repeating the message until someone came through.

"Stagecoach, this is Charlie one," a faint voice said into the man's earpiece.

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mystery of The Verne Club?



<http://thefreebundle.com/verne-club/>

”We are getting multiple shots on the southeast wall of the building. What is happening up there, over.”

The older bodyguard’s throat tightened. “Copy, Charlie one. The shooter cut off the elevator cables. We are stuck somewhere between the eighth and third floor, over.”

“Understood stagecoach, what’s the VIP status, over.”

The bodyguard turned around and took a long look at Sahib to assess the situation with the coldness of a man looking at horses on a track before placing his bet. The old man was sweating freely, although the day was cold. He was naturally thin, which he recognized would make all that blood he was losing into a problem sooner than later. Above anything else, the most prominent feature was that the old man was quite tall, about a head or so taller than him, which gave them at least fifteen minutes before he began losing consciousness, and perhaps twenty-five minutes total until he went into shock and had to be revived.

In the past, the bodyguard would have never taken a job without first having a copy of the client’s physical signed by the agency’s medical examiners board at least two weeks before meeting the client, but times changed, and the old protocols were slowly being replaced by the urgencies of the present political and corporate affairs.

A bad knee can put everyone at mortal

risk in the middle of gunfire. A chronic back pain can make a cripple out of someone after being hurled to the ground for cover. An arrhythmia that flares into atrial fibrillation at the worst possible time can get an entire team killed while trying to revive the client—he had seen it happen during his years on the Secret Service, and even though he had sworn to himself never end up being that careless, he needed the money bad enough to say yes to whatever the firm tossed his way. Luckily for him, Sahib had agreed on answering a few critical questions regarding his physical condition when they were introduced the day before.

As far as the bodyguard knew, the old man had no heart-related issues, had been smart enough to never smoke or use recreational drugs, and was not on any heavy meds. Besides the slight anemia and Vitamin D deficiency that usually comes with age, Sahib was the picture of health. That is, without taking into account, the torn ear and blown cheek. He had caught a bullet to the face and would probably spend the next six or eight months in and out of hospitals for reconstructive surgery, and maybe twice that until someone comes up with a way for him to wear glasses again.

“The VIP is code yellow, Charlie One, over.” The bodyguard said.

“Copy Stagecoach. What’s your current status, over?”

Sahib cleared his throat violently; the strong stench of burnt rubber and metal had started to fill the car. "Copy Charlie one; the elevator's automatic brakes kicked in, and we are currently not falling, but we could surely use some help on getting out of here before that changes over."

"Copied Stagecoach, emergency services have been notified, and we have a team heading your way. Please stand by for extraction, over."

"Can you give us an E.T.A for that team, Charlie one? Over."

"That's a negative Stagecoach; you will just have to wait."

"Did they just put us on hold?" The young bodyguard said. His eyes were gloomy with desperation. The older bodyguard threw him a look, and he had to turn away from him to hide the frustration drawn onto his face.

Sahib tried to get to his feet, but his knees were feeling particularly weak after losing a copious amount of blood for a man of his age, so he decided to remain where he was.

"You know who's doing this?" The older bodyguard asked Sahib, but the Arab ignored him. His eyes were two narrow black pools filled with a dangerous mix of fear and hatred.

The young bodyguard exploded, "What the hell could be taking them so long?" He was covering his mouth and nose with a handkerchief, but it wasn't helping much with the cough.

"It has only been a minute; give it some time," the other said.

"I'm sorry to break it to you, man, but we don't have time! That smell? That's the brakes; if we don't get out of here now, this thing is going to fall!"

"We are not that heavy, son," the older bodyguard said, "We should be fine until someone comes to get us out." He turned to Sahib and said, "It is going to be okay, sir, they are coming for us," with his best professional tone, which came out so unnatural that it stank the place even more than the brakes did.

A short series of metallic clanks came from around them almost in sequence, followed by the growing sound of a rubber band stretching to its limit. Before any of them could pinpoint where the sound was coming from, lights began to flicker, and something gave in. The brakes screamed all the way down the two floors. It took them to stop fasten around the rails again. The world bounced violently for Sahib as he covered his head with bony arms trying to avoid getting hit by the loose pieces of wall that showered them from above. The older bodyguard leaned over Sahib and saved him from a big chunk of brick that would have potentially made that mangled face of his symmetrical.

It took the elevator a long, full minute to stop complaining.

"We can't stay in here any longer, man," the young bodyguard said, "This

thing's not going to hold much longer with all that debris on top of us."

He was right, as often young people are, but with experience also comes patience, and his older partner knew better than panicking and making a bad situation worse, so he shot him another dart with the eye and said, "The brakes will hold, son. Now calm yourself down."

The stench of burnt metal was so strong someone could have been soldering right in the elevator with them, and it wouldn't have stank half that much.

The air was thick, poisonous. The men's cough came hard, hurting their throats on the way out even more than it did on the way in.

Sahib tried to say something about the doors, but he was coughing his lungs out the same way the old bodyguard and his partner were, only there was a slight difference in the way Sahib coughed, and it showed. It was too deep, too guttural, like air being sucked into a manhole on the street during a storm.

"Are you feeling okay, sir?" The young bodyguard said. Sahib nodded and pointed at the door. It took them a moment to realize what he was trying to say; with all the shaking, the doors had bulged open a few inches. The slit was crooked and something neither of them could use to get through, but it was large enough for someone's fingers,

and that was all they needed.

The old bodyguard gave it his best shot, but age was getting in the way despite being strongly built, so he moved aside and let his younger partner do the job.

Had the doors been nailed, they wouldn't have been that stuck together, and it wasn't until both men worked together at it as frantically as they could afford without shaking the entire metal cage too much that they bulged open.

The first one out of the elevator was the old bodyguard, who, after unholstering his gun and quickly making sure the hallway was clear, he turned around and began helping Sahib. For some reason, though, he couldn't get him out, even though he pulled with both feet anchored to the frame of the door. His partner got pissed at the sight of the slowness of age and tried expediting the matter by pushing the frail old man up from behind, only to find himself as useless as his partner.

"Wait," the old bodyguard said, trying to wake his arms by shaking them, "this will get us nowhere. We almost broke our backs pulling the doors open."

"You are right," the younger bodyguard said while crouching on all fours next to Sahib, "Hurry, sir, see if you can hop on my back to push yourself up before that maniac starts shooting again."

The sound the young bodyguard's back made when Sahib used it to push

himself out of the elevator was as sudden and terrible as the racket of a tree branch that snaps under its own dead weight.

Stark terror broke loose when the brakes finally gave in. The shrieks of horror from the young bodyguard that was still trapped inside the elevator as it fell were as loud as the screeching of the metal cage bouncing against the walls of the shaft and lasted longer after darkness swallowed him.

"What a rotten way to go, uh?" Sahib said. A faint nervous smile drew across his dry lips, but he quickly hid it.

The bodyguard said nothing. Still, there was no way someone who couldn't be more than 50 kilograms wet had shaken the elevator the way the old man did when he got out. Even more screwy, he was absolutely positively sure, without the thinnest shadow of a doubt, that someone as frail-looking as Sahib could not break the back of a twenty-five-year-old gym rat by simply using his weight the way he had just witnessed happening moments ago.

A mistake. A whim of stress. Pressure does strange things to a man's senses when sitting on the ledge for a long time.

Rain sleeted hard against the hallway windows while the bodyguard tried every channel on his radio, but getting a hold on someone felt as useless as shaking off the growing gut feeling that there was something odd about the old

man--something he couldn't put the finger on just yet.

"Well? Are they coming for us or not?" Sahib said. His voice had risen. He was upset at the way the bodyguard kept staring at him.

"We're taking the stairs," the bodyguard said, unholstering his weapon and helping the old man back to his feet. He noticed nothing unusual about Sahib's weight then, other than perhaps the old man was a tad heavier than what he appeared to be, so he left it alone for the time being and focused on getting to the parking lot instead.

Sahib had soggy legs from all the blood loss, so they had to stop every couple of floors for him to rest, or he would stumble downstairs. While they waited for him to recover his strength, the bodyguard began to fiddle with the knobs on his radio but only caught static.

When he first heard the shots echoing from the floors below, the bodyguard's heart skipped a beat. Frantically, he began switching through the channels on his radio more rapidly, trying every frequency saved on his speed-dial and then going through the ones in between until screams came up through his earpiece.

He recognized some of the voices from the firm's annual new year's eve party. Others, he concluded, had to be from police officers and firefighters.

He wasted no time and, gun in hand,

took the old man by the arm and forced him downstairs as fast as he could. He had to get to the parking lot before the shots stopped before whatever was happening ran its course, and there were no more distractions for whoever had come for the client.

The first thing the bodyguard noticed when they came out of the stair door into the parking lot was that there were no other cars there; only the black sedan limousine that the Cult of the Jorodowskys had sent so Sahib could get to his ten or so meetings of the day.

The second thing he noticed was that the driver's head sat too loose, almost awkwardly unnatural on the seat's headrest, but he could not realize it until they were already a few steps from the car's door, and by then, it was already too late.

The man the shadows delivered behind them was in his fifties, tall and powerfully built, with silver hair that almost reached his shoulders, and a Van Dyke style-beard that gave him a certain distinction that contrasted firmly with the brutal coldness of his port. He was dressed in a brown overcoat and carried a worn-out wooden box by a brass handle.

The stranger's face was grim. His eyes, two dark slits filled with a merciless rage he was barely able to keep under wraps. The man had the stare of an avenging angel, of a judge dictating a death sentence. He had the cold, ice eyes of a

man whose only sorrow is to be able to kill only once.

The bodyguard's knees went soggy. The man was not a hired gun. He was not a wacko either. This was totally different from all the other scenarios he had trained for.

Shaken, he made a shameful attempt to say something, but choked with his own words when his eyes drifted downwards and he saw the size of the revolver the man was holding tight against the waist.

The engravings at the side of the man's gun were as alien to him as the gun itself, which vaguely resembled a Spanish flint of the 19th century, but with an equally adorned drum that could potentially hold at least six .44 bullets—enough to cut a man in half. As impressive workmanship as the revolver was, all the bodyguard could look at was the square barrel of similar proportions to the American Desert Eagle that was being pointed at his guts and the cold hell in the stare of the man that held it.

"You cheated death long enough, monster," the mysterious stranger with the gun said, grimly. His voice was deep and powerful. It commanded instant obedience.

"Helsing," someone muttered. The voice came from behind the bodyguard, only it was not Sahib's. This one was a harsh, bubbling voice, with something dreadfully unnerving underneath its deep

and menacing tone. To the bodyguard, the mere idea that there were words that could be formed from such nauseous sounds erupted a basic human repulsion so strong that it made him gag.

Without taking his eyes off the gun, the bodyguard began to turn towards the voice, but stopped cold when he caught a glimpse of the abomination standing behind him with the corner of his eye. It was a large, pale figure, so horrendous and disproportionate that the bodyguard realized how lucky he had been for keeping his eyes stuck at the gun instead of completely turning his head since no man could have experienced looking at such terror in full without sinking into madness.

Although it was nothing more than a blurred shadow in the bodyguard's peripheral vision, he saw that the thing was lean, abnormally tall, and shaped in a way that was impossible for a sane mind to grasp. The very air exhaled by its heavy, shallow breathing seemed to have a repugnant odor that could only be compared to the stench of wet garbage or perhaps that of an open grave.

But as much as he sought out to steer his eyes away from that aberration twisting itself erect behind him, the bodyguard found himself helplessly paralyzed. He had gone into a state of profound shock—wholly bewildered at the grotesqueness of that nightmarish apparition.

The words the thing was whispering spoke of foul things mankind thought of as eradicated in darkest times. They were neither Arab, nor they belonged to any other language the bodyguard heard being spoken before. There were hints he recognized to be maybe Greek, others his mind tricked him into finding old Castilian and Hebrew traces, but the vocals and consonants were mostly made of clicks and bubbling noises, too disgusting to be a dialect, and if horror had allowed him, he would have fainted when the insanity behind him began to laugh.

"Get ready," Helsing said with eyes that smiled even far more ruthlessly than the thing's laughter, "I'm going to make sure this hurts like hell."

The gun cocked once, and as it did, the bodyguard felt something grab and cut deep into his shoulder, pushing him towards Helsing before he could move aside or even flinch with the pain. It was a hand pushing him—it was Sahib's hand. It was grotesquely elongated and heavy, covered in large pale gelatinous scales beneath an irregular layer of unnatural thick, almost greenish hair, with long curved nails that resembled more to protruding bones than a man's fingers.

The gun roared in Helsing's hand, leaving a thick cloud of gunpowder between them. It was partly thanks to this smoke and to the gun's roar that the spell that seemed to hold the bodyguard

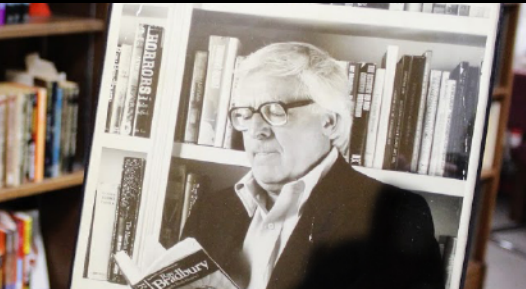
immovable broke and he was able to turn around at the thing that had almost put him in the way of death.

The frail old man was curled on the floor, dying from a shot in his stomach. His guts were splattered behind him, and the wet, foul sounds he made before darkness twisted him to his last breath became engulfed by the echo of the gunshot—something the bodyguard almost felt relieved of, for the old man was cursing in that detestable tongue he had used before.

"What the hell was him?" The bodyguard said, his eyes still fixated on the twisted corpse of the old man.

Helsing chose not to answer, for even he knows there are no words in the human tongue that can describe the madness that lurks in the dark, and as he turned around and began to walk into the shadows that brought him, the bodyguard felt the giant claw-like wound burn on his shoulder.

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Behind Those Eyes

By Paul Lubaczewski

Paul has lived all over the country before settling in Appalachia over fifteen years ago with his wife Leslie and their son. He also has two adult children living in his native Pennsylvania. He is the author of two horror comedy novels, with a third one on the way from Madness Heart Press. Along with that he has published a novella and a collection of novelettes from St. Rooster Books.

IN some ways, I am in a cell in a prison, in most ways I am in hell. Worst of all the cell in the prison in the depths of hell is inside of me. The cruelest prison of all is to see everything you've ever desired right on the other side of the bars. Locked in some distant cell miles from anywhere would be easy in comparison to this. I am locked inside myself, unable to act, unable to interact, with no control over anything at all. My body has become my jail, it has

become my purgatory.

I don't know why I was targeted, I don't know what it was about me that made me an appealing victim. My jailer has not thought enough of me to answer that question or any of my many questions. He doesn't talk to me to give me his views, or request mine. He just runs this show, leaving me a prisoner forced to bear witness as he indulges his whims with me along for the ride in my own body. A year or two ago I would have thought none of this a possibility, I would have laughed at you if you had suggested it to me. A year or two can make a massive difference in one's perspective.

I can't even tell you exactly when it started, I can only say when I began to notice. I have always been a bit of a drinker, but not one you would accuse of ever being "blackout drunk." But suddenly one day, I would go out with some friends to a bar, or go to a party, and when I woke up the next day hours of my life would suddenly be unaccounted for. When I realized this was becoming an issue, first I began to carefully watch my alcohol intake thinking I solved the issue. I blamed myself the first few times, the way I figured it was that in a social setting like that, maybe you'd SAY you weren't going to drink that much, but saying that didn't exactly mean you'd keep your word about it. I just assumed that two had become six or more in the vacant pieces of my

mind. But when I would casually ask about those times to friends, even though I couldn't remember a thing, they would act like nothing was amiss in my behavior, nor did they remember drinking anymore, or less, than usual.

Of course, I stopped drinking altogether, but over time, the black spots got longer than the clear ones. I went to Doctors, I saw specialists, nobody could find a thing wrong with me. By the time I had figured out what was happening, by the point it had taken root so deep that it could afford to torment me by letting me watch my loss of control, it was already too late to find help to stop it. The monster inside had more control than I did. It had slowly moved most of my things out of the rooms in my brain while I wasn't looking, and now, I was just visiting my own home. The only home any of us truly have, our own body, and I had become a guest in mine.

Possessed.

I want to stress, I have no idea how this was done to me. I have had the time to think about it, believe you me, and I'm coming up blank. No mysterious objects, no creepy little girls, no nursery rhymes or old ladies... Not a thing that I can think of that could possibly tell me the most important question in the world to me, "Why me?"

But here, we are.

Decarbia is his name, and he is in control of my world, and I get to watch

it from the passenger seat without any real influence on any of it. A prisoner. He taunts me sometimes, I'm sure that was why he hooked up with my ex that one night, it certainly wasn't for the pleasure of her company. No, it was just to show me he could get her to come around, just to show me how it was done. Just to let me seethe and stew while he thrust away at her and made her climax in ways I had never come close to. Pure devilish cruelty on his part, he did it, because he knew it would hurt me.

He does things, things that are evil, but you'd never know it to look at him, or me as it were. His main interests seem to be rocks, birds, and plants, which sounds harmless enough. Unless you think about it. If you can change one rock to the other, or make a flock of birds do things, or turn a healthy herb to poison, you can create holy hell. He does it all the time, he's fiddling, trying to figure out the way to use his powers to cause the most damage, a layer of impermeable sandstone that was built on becomes fractured shale, a flock of sparrows will swarm an elderly person, dandelions will suddenly be poisonous to touch...

All I get to do is watch.

But maybe not much longer.

I've had time to watch him, to learn, to learn ABOUT him. You see, he leaves my body when it sleeps, he still freezes me out of the control mechanisms

when he leaves, but at least he goes. He goes to what he calls the astral plane and then comes back when it's time to turn the machine that is my prison back on. But if he leaves, surely that means that I can too! Maybe, maybe, I can study him, and find a way to keep him from returning here. I can't just seize the controls back, I've tried, but maybe, just maybe, out there away from my body I can fight him off.

SUCCESS! Well, at least a partial success, I did manage to leave my prison today for a little while. I floated outside of my body, able to finally move freely of it tasting freedom for the first time in ages. I could sense vast expanses of places, far beyond our world or our knowing that I could, if I wanted, now travel to. But then fear gripped at my heart, how would I know how to get back? What if my body moved in my absence? What if he saw me free from my tethers and responded by increasing the bondage he holds me in?

I decided, that I would make a trip briefly around the known, and knowable, but no more than that until I was more sure about what I was doing. My fears were reasonable I think. I know nothing of this version of the world, if I was to encounter Decarbia, in my toddling infancy, I fail to see how the demon could be thwarted in besting me. I would be at his mercy. No, even children need to crawl first, so that's what I intend to do for now.

Just as important was to avoid loved ones as I floated free of my body. I just don't know what would happen if in this state my emotions ran away from me. Maybe I would lose my route back to my body, overcome by my desire to communicate with the person in front of me. It is impossible to know but hopefully achievable to learn. I have triumphed in what I wanted, to leave my cell, now I need to re-learn how to walk like a free soul.

After that, I will consider how to fight like one.

Time has passed, and yet I feel no further along in my goals. Not in my ability to move about, I can do that amply, if anything I feel that has gone quite well. No, no, not in that at all, but my ability to evict this squatter in my body, that, I have severe doubts in. Decarabia has had vast eons with which to work to learn his craft and his trade, I didn't know I could even do this before he got here. He knows the hidden world of the astral plane better than any creature in the heavens and the earth, better than me at any rate, and that's the only way that matters.

Worse, I think he begins to suspect my new found freedoms. It is my own fault really, I tried to leave a trap for him. I think now that the Lord's Prayer and the powers it is supposed to have are highly overrated. I wrote the passage surrounding my body on that higher plane of existence. Having been finally

able to read on the subject, I was led to believe that Decarabia would not be able to pass, that it would enrage him, and thwart him. Frustrated at his control over my mortal form he would flow away to find some easier to dominate fleshy form from which to work his mischief.

I have to admit, that at first, it was effective, for a moment at least. As I hid inside my own body, I watched as Decarabia floated into view. He approached to re-take his seat in my form when he stopped, a look of puzzlement passed across his face, followed by annoyance. His face under his bushy hair and beard crunched up into such a face of concentration that it seemed that all but his eyes and nose vanished from view in the hairy depths.

I felt so much relief, triumph, and elation at that moment. Finally! I could have freedom again! I would work on dismantling what he had done to keep me from control, and my own body would be back, free to go about my way. But, it was not to be. Before my eyes, I could see the demon wiping line after line of the prayer away like an irate teacher clearing a slate. Willing it somehow into non-existence, moving ever closer to me, until like a thief breaking into his former residence knowing which windows have broken locks he was back inside of me.

I could hear his thought echoing in the chambers of the head we shared,

“Did you make this little man?” When I did not answer, he said, “Well you can see how well it worked can you not? Now let us have no more of this foolishness.”

I have been mainly watching again these last few months. Oh, I step on to the plain of ghosts now and again when he isn't looking, but the lack of physicality depresses me. I could, I suppose, just leave altogether, but I suspect that anything that is further out along these spirit realms could not be much better than even this prison. It stands to reason, otherwise, why would Decarabia have taken my body from me if having a body was not to be preferred?

No, I am sure of it, there is something about the solid everyday reality that draws all manner of spirits to it. Something more real about it, that makes it desirable. I fear, that if I were to drift off into some other realm, I would lose any chance of regaining control of my own body, I would lose any chance at this reality again. I have to hold out hope for this, anything short of that is just madness.

So I bide. I watch him. He teaches classes on spirituality; I look on those who come to them with barely concealed contempt. Imagine, going to this usurper and bully for some form of guidance. He has taught many of them how to travel into the astral plane itself. Like there was some enlightenment there and not others like him. Feh! No,

I have found none, all that I have found is that the you that you take out of your body, is the you that you always were. Leaving your body only allows you to annoy people on a metaphysical plane, rather than the normal physical one that you usually use to gather their ire to you. I don't know, maybe for some people, it comes as a surprise that they really are obnoxious.

But yet they come to him, and then his special students he takes them further and further afield. It allows me some freedom while they're gone I suppose. But he has left some spell on my actual body that does not allow me to use it. I can only drift along the dreary world of moaning specters as they join me in pining away for a more physical existence than they are allowed. I suppose that I should feel grateful for any freedom, I know I did at first when I was first able to break free of the cage that my body had become. But if all I'm allowed is to watch reality go rolling by like flickering images on a theater screen, is that to be considered freedom at all? Or just a mockery of the very word freedom?

I am a fool.

With nothing but time, I began to plot another route to freedom. If I could not have my own body, my property returned to me, by force, by trickery, or just from common decency, could I not take another body as my own? Now do not misunderstand me, I did not want

the body of some innocent, some poor soul going through life blameless until I came along and ousted them from their rightful property. Nor, did I wish to evict someone from their home, I'm not like that. I could never steal from the innocent, or worse, do to them that which I have had to endure.

But, what if someone was to give up their body? To walk away from it for purposes of power and personal enrichment? Such as one that could hardly be considered an innocent could they? If anything, it would be the retrieval of abandoned goods. Left without a soul, and taken residence in by one who had need of it. Most states have squatter's rights laws on the books, who could consider it anything but the same?

Alright, maybe I was rationalizing my actions, I'm willing to concede that.

Decarabia held his classes in a little house he had purchased with my money. He was paid quite handsomely to teach those who wished to exploit the astral plane for some ill-formed reasons of their own, and not only had he replenished the funds he stole from me, my body was richer than it had ever been. Which meant they would be leaving their own bodies vacant. All I would need was one who was not so strong in himself, someone deserving that I could hold out and at bay from his body after I had taken possession of it. Once I'd achieved my goal, I would be free!

Finally free! It would not be my actual true form, but still, I would be able to touch the world again. To venture forth and DO things rather than observe them, that alone would be enough for now.

It took weeks to find the right time once I had formulated my plan of action. I knew that while I had much practice in the art of walking in the spirit world, a strong or practiced soul would easily evict me if they knew I was there. I was no Decarabia after all, no ancient demon who could inflict his will upon others. I dare not fail in this, I had never left my body while Decarabia was inside, and had my doubts if I could return if he was. The last thing that I could afford was to become one of those weak, and powerless spirits that floated there in the astral plane, bemoaning their ineffectiveness at enacting their desires on the world of living, breathing men.

But there, sitting with two older gentlemen in the fine leather seats all drawn into a circle sat a young man I had never seen before. He could not have even been twenty-five, not a wrinkle, nor a line blemished his face. No gray hairs had found their way onto his head of dark hair. He would be perfect, a neophyte who had no idea the sort of risks he was taking when he engaged in these sorts of activities!

If I was the one controlling my breathing as I waited to pounce it would

have gasped and fluttered like a school-boy the first time his hand clutches at a breast. If my heart had been responsive to my emotions and not Decarabia's it would have raced like a champion thoroughbred. It was all that I could do to keep my emotions in check lest Decarabia sense my turmoil and become suspicious of my arousal. I dare not even consider what that might mean towards my abilities or to my plans.

I waited, as the four of them fell into deep trances. Their breathing slowed, they put their bodies into a state of stasis, like a machine operating on automatic. Their breathing still happening, their hearts beating even and regular, but with no help from their mind which had already begun to leave. As I watched in the shadows of my own body, I could see with my second sight as the four of them stepped away from their earthly shells.

Decarabia stood there, not manifested in my body, but in his true form. I tried desperately to control my hatred and rage at him, lest he sense it even detached now from our body. The shaggy bearded figure turned to the others and smiled beatifically, "Today, gentlemen, we will travel far enough and long enough to hear the Musica Universalis! But what is time and distance to those such as we are now?"

All of them now turned their way upwards and followed the devil they had been duped into worshiping and

trusting. In a moment, they were gone from sight and sound. Now! Now was my chance, finally, after all these many months of misery I had the opportunity to act in the world again I let myself drift away from my shell, my prison, I had only moments to work with. I needed to seize control and flee as soon as possible.

But there, I could see my way clear! The pathways were open, the doors flung gaping, the boy did not know well enough to so much as lock the doors behind him. I plunged into this mortal form without another thought. I sank into the physical mind grasping onto the controls of the body and felt myself smile. A real smile, controlled by my conscious desires. I was free!

But not yet, not completely, first I would have to make good my crime. If I fled now all would be suspicious, those men would go and find this body, worse they might try and bring it back to fix what I'd done. So I held myself in check and I waited for their return. Now that I was corporeal, the time did not seem long at all, the idea of time is not the same to astral travelers. I waited for the owner of this body to try to return, I saw him coming with the others. I saw each of them glower in concentration towards the return to their physical form, I saw him turn to rejoin his body, but I held my will firm. I held him out of this his home as he moved to return, saw his soul bounce

back from his own body. I could see the look of fear cross over him, to be replaced by panic as he realized his soul could no longer return to his mortal form. I felt almost ill at what I was doing, but I held myself firm, or I would never know the flesh again for more than just this moment.

The others could not hear his entreaties for assistance, each had already begun to sink into their mortal beings. The confusion the doomed young man felt caused him to drift, un-tethered and loose, until even if he had wished to contest me he was unsure how to try. Success! While I had given up my own body at least I HAD a body once more. Now I could allow myself to smile and I did, letting a wide grin take hold on my face. The others would excuse it as youthful exuberance instead of what it was, the joy of freedom.

"That is incredible," I breathed not using the words I meant, but the ones my victim would have.

My body with Decarabia in it looked at me, he raised his eyebrow and replied, "I'm so glad you enjoyed it."

"It is always a wonder," said one of the older men getting to his feet.

"Always," said the other.

I took this as my cue and joined the others getting to my feet.

The older men both pumped the hand of my former body as they made their way towards the door to the outside, which was so tantalizingly close now. I

quickly made my way to join them, desperately trying to avoid Decarabia. I was almost through the door when I felt Decarabia's hand fell on my shoulder.

"Stay a moment Ronald, I think you might benefit from some additional instruction," he said as he held me there.

I wanted to pull myself free, to run for freedom, but how could I? All Decarabia would have to do was expose me to the others to engage their aid if he found out the truth. My entire plan had hinged upon stealth, if I were to panic now it would give it all away. I had no friends here, no one to run to screaming to for help in this neighborhood. I could only hope to bluff my way through.

With no option, I followed Decarabia back to his study. It was all over in an instant. He whirled towards me and seized my arm. Instantly I felt his conscious flood into me, more violent and painful than his slow taking over from, before. I was almost instantly thrown back into my cage, except now this cage was an entirely different body. All my work, all my efforts, and I was imprisoned yet again!

"But why?" my soul screamed echoing in the confines of our brain.

"Oh, you silly fool, if only you had waited," I heard the soul of Decarabia chuckling in the darkness I felt confined in.

"What do you mean? Surely the soul

of this man was not precious to you that you would continue with your torture of me?" I exclaimed with an actual affront to it.

"No, not in the least. But you almost thwarted my plans. It seems we were both lusting after this powerful young body. I had planned to take it myself today, but when we returned from our sojourn I found it, somehow, already occupied," while I could not see it, I could sense a smile as he explained.

"Well, well let me have me back my old body. You have no need of it anymore," I pleaded.

"And leave you unpunished? You? Who would thwart the will of a creature who once strode next to God and Lucifer themselves, and think you would walk away unscathed and unrepentant? Oh, but I think not. No, punishment must be dealt out to those who do not know their place in this world, and the next," Decarabia's voice almost sounded sad.

"But what of all the time you've already had me captive? Isn't that torment enough? Will you never let me return to my flesh?"

"Maybe, once I've decided that you are TRULY sorry."

And then, the demon closed off the window of communication so he would no longer have to hear my sobbing. Worst of all, not only had he taken from me my triumph, he had left me with a greater torment, hope.



A strange door surfaces in the middle
of the South Pole.

Nobody knows how it got there.
Nobody knows what's behind.

Walter Gibson, a seasoned war
correspondent, will be joining a group of
scientists from every nation to find out.

Grab your gear and accompany him
as he walks...

THROUGH THE GATES OF MADNESS

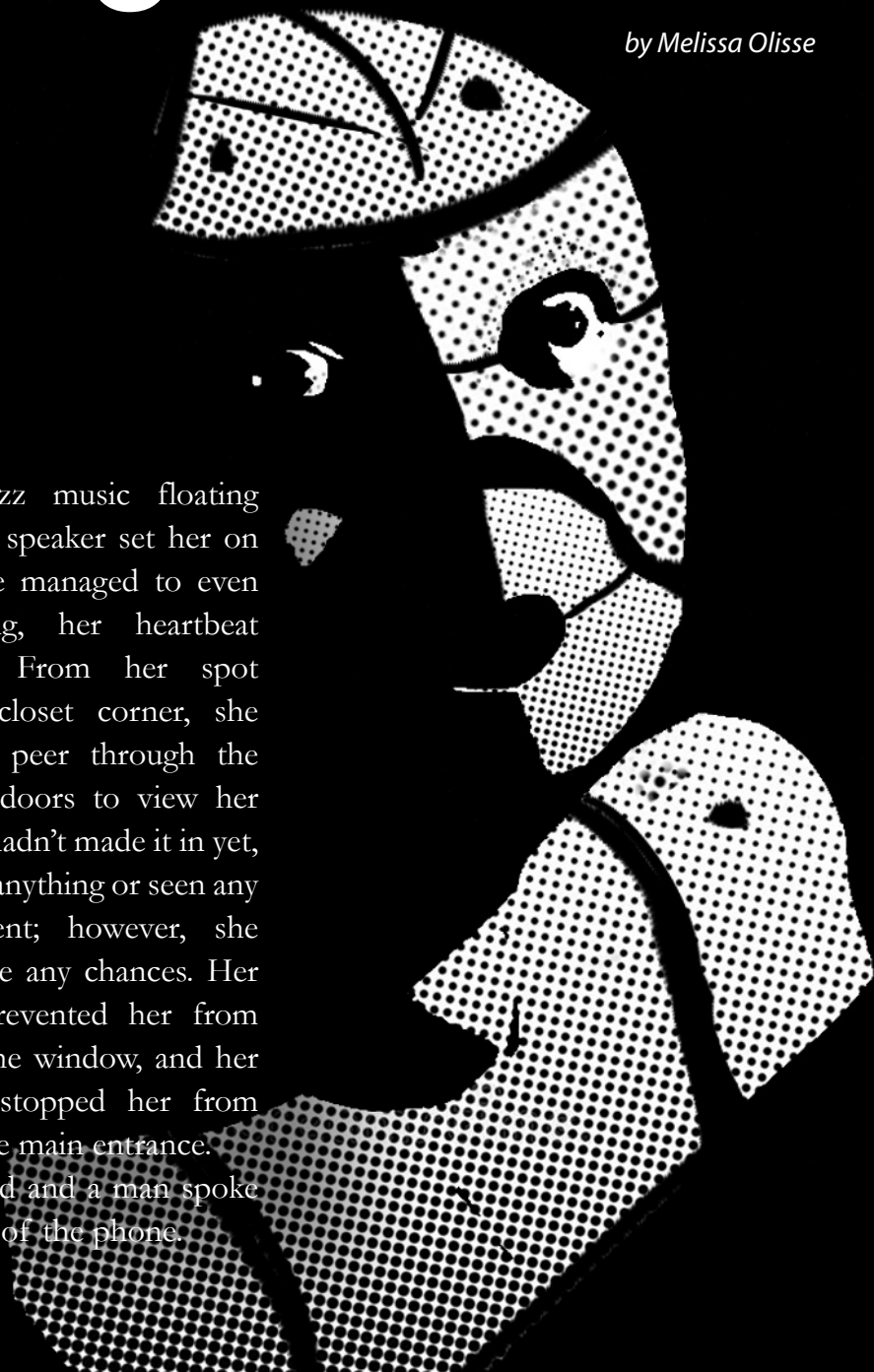
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Have You Tried Turning It off and Turning It Back On?

by Melissa Olisse

THE generic jazz music floating through the phone speaker set her on edge. Although she managed to even out her breathing, her heartbeat remained erratic. From her spot crouched in the closet corner, she would periodically peer through the gaps between the doors to view her room. She knew it hadn't made it in yet, as she hadn't heard anything or seen any signs of movement; however, she wasn't going to take any chances. Her fear of heights prevented her from escaping through the window, and her overall cowardice stopped her from making a run for the main entrance.

The music stopped and a man spoke from the other side of the phone.



“Hello and thank you for calling Helper Bots©, home of the world-class artificially intelligent androids. This is Jerry speaking. Who do I have the pleasure of speaking with today?”

Maxine brought her hand over her mouth as she whispered, “Hi. I’m having issues with my droid. It’s trying to kill me.”

“I seem to be having trouble hearing you. Can you please speak up a little bit?”

“My android is trying to kill me.”

“Oh.” He grew silent for a few seconds.

“I’m sorry to hear about that,” he finally said. “Can I have your name and account number so I could pull up your information?”

“Jesus Chr- my name is Maxine Elliot.” She let out a sigh. “I can’t remember my account number.”

“It’s located on the Profile tab on the Helper Bot© app if you ca-”

“I don’t have the app.” She squeezed the bridge of her nose between her fingertips.

“What is the phone number associated with your account?”

“555-2836.”

“Thank you, Ms. Elliot. I’m going to transfer you to our technical department since they can better help you with your-”

“No wait please!” she said a little too loudly. “I’ve been waiting on the line for like ten minutes, I don’t know how

much longer I can wait here.”

“I understand ma’am, but unfortunately I’m not equipped to deal with this situation, I mostly deal with general questions and transferring to other departments.”

“Okay but can’t you-” she was interrupted by a click and more uninspired jazz music.

She cursed herself for not doing something sooner when she first noticed the problem.

When the purple light circles around the Helper Bot’s© eyes three times, it’s ready to go!

When she had completed the installation, the purple light had circled around like it was supposed to, however, the android didn’t give the warm and welcoming, “Hello and thank you for choosing me as your Helper Bot©! How may I be of your service?”, as written in the manual. Nor did it respond to the name Juno which she had given it, after the hero from one of her favorite TV shows. It had the same untamed, fluffy hair and cool green irises; it was as if it stepped right out of her flatscreen. Every time she called out “Juno”, she was met with stoic empty eyes. In fact, it barely responded to any of the commands she made. Hadn’t said a single thing since she booted it up. However, it did sometimes follow her when she moved around, so she knew it couldn’t be entirely broken. She figured it maybe needed a bit of time to

warm up, and she promised to check the manual later if it still wouldn't work.

"Hello and thank you for calling! You have reached the Helper Bot© technical support department, this is Margaret speaking. How may I help you today?"

"I'm having an emergency right now. My android has spent the past thirty minutes trying to kill me."

"I'm having a bit of trouble hearing you. Are you on speaker?"

"No, I'm not on speaker," she whispered a bit louder. "I'm about to get killed! By my robot!"

"That's very troubling to hear, ma'am. I'm sorry you're experiencing issues with your android. Can I have the name and account number associated with your account?"

She felt like throwing her phone against the wall, forgetting about the fear that kept her frozen beside the growing pile of dirty laundry. Her legs had started tingling a few minutes ago, and now she couldn't feel them at all.

"Look, I don't know my account number, my name is Maxine Elliot, and my phone number is 555-2836. Please, I really can't be wasting any more time. I need help."

"I'm working as fast as possible ma'am. Just give me one moment."

Maxine thought she heard some shuffling from outside her room and peered through the gap again. Nothing. She had left the android downstairs after it tried putting her in a chokehold. She

was surprised at how soft and realistic its skin felt, and even more surprised at the vice grip it took on her collar.

"Okay Ms. Elliot, I have all of your information pulled up. You're saying that your Helper Bot© is trying to ..." the woman trailed off.

"Kill me. Yes."

"Hmm. That is very odd." Maxine could hear the click-clacking of a keyboard on the other end. "Have you called the police Ms. Elliot?"

She had frantically dialed 911 several times as she raced throughout the house but was met with a disconnected tone.

"I tried but couldn't get through. I don't know, but I think the android might've had something to do with it."

"I don't think our androids are capable of tampering with things in that nature."

"But they are capable of killing?"

"Would you like me to call 911 and send them over?"

"Yes please," she begged.

"Alright ma'am, can you confirm the address that is registered on your account,"

"3475 Harper Cross Road."

"City and zip code?"

"Jacksonville, FL, 32201."

"Alright I will send someone over... hold for one moment please."

"Wait--"

A flurry of piano keys filled her ear once again.

Maxine squeezed her eyes shut and held her breath. She could hear the sound of a door opening on the other side of the wall where she leaned.

It was in the bathroom.

She could hear its footsteps against the tiles. A whooshing noise suggested the shower curtain had been pushed aside.

Maxine wished she called after the first time it launched the kitchen knife at her. In her defense, she thought it was an honest mistake. They were in the middle of cooking when she bent over to grab something from inside the fridge. She barely registered the thud of the knife lodging into the cabinet where her head had been in front. When she caught sight of it, she chalked it up as a mistake. Possibly a fault in its coordination, or maybe it didn't finish calibrating properly during the setup. The second time, however, when they had long finished the Alfredo recipe and started putting the utensils away, she was in too much shock to do anything, narrowly missing the blade and losing a few strands of hair in the process.

"Alright Ms. Elliot, the police are on their way. I am truly sorry about what you're going through. You can keep the robot and I can send you another free of charge, or I can offer you credit on your next- "

"I don't care about any of that. Is there any way you can stop this right now?" she asked desperately.

She heard more typing.

"Well, I can shut down the robot from my end."

The footsteps had left the bathroom and entered the hallway.

"Yes. Please do that!"

"Alright. So, before I proceed, I'm going to send a five-digit security code to your phone that I will need you to repeat back to me."

Her phone let out a loud ding as the text message came through. The bedroom door creaked open, and footsteps entered. Maxine's trembling fingers had her struggling to read the numbers on the screen.

She couldn't hear her own voice over her heart leaping in her throat. "F-f-f-five, th-ree, s-s-even--"

"I'm sorry ma'am, but I need you to speak up."

The footsteps stopped. A figure blocked the light seeping into the door cracks.

"Hello?"

Maxine's blood froze cold as the doors swung open. Cold green eyes stared down at her.

"Hello?" the woman asked. "Are you still there Ms. Elliot?"

The android reached down and pulled the phone from her hand.

"Hel--"

It pushed the end call button. Light bounced off the kitchen blade in its other hand.

Incinerating Mr. Six

by Jeff Fields McCormack

Jeff Fields McCormack is a recent graduate of East Texas Baptist University. He is currently pursuing an M.A. in English at Texas A&M University in Commerce. Jeff is the founder and Editor-In-Chief of Midnight Manuscripts Quarterly. His stories have been published in magazines and anthologies around the world. Jeff can be found on Twitter @JeffFMcCormack



“Make sure you lock up those little freaks this time, Mikey. The last thing I want to do is chase Snake Boy and his little brother again. They nearly escaped last time. Can you imagine the public response if those things broke out of the facility?”

My heart sank every time I heard that cruel voice. I knew that my brother and I were the “freaks” that they were referring to.

We were experiments. Apart from one or two fleeting glimpses of the dark corridor outside, my brother and I had never seen whatever existed beyond the corners of our cell. Yes, cell. We are treated like prisoners here. We are freaks, remember?

Most children have fond memories of their mother’s soothing voice reading a lullaby to them, coaxing them to sleep. Our “lullaby” was the occasional masked passerby reading the warning sign that had been posted on the door to our cell. I have heard their voices recite that warning enough times that I have managed to memorize the words of its horrid message: “caution: the entities within this containment unit are experimental in nature and should be considered extremely hazardous. Only site officials with Level Four or higher clearance may proceed. All other individuals should avoid this containment unit.”

During my time here, I have grown to hate that sign and the negative emo-

tions that are often a result of its frightening warning. My brother and I are not hazardous, but people are not aware of this. We have no way of telling them anything to the contrary. We have no connection with the outside world because of the presence of that sign. That sign speaks for us.

People believe the words of that sign without question and recoil in fear. Sometimes, the more curious individuals peer into the small glass window that has been carved into the door of our cell. They all react in the same way: fear. Pure, unwavering terror. With one look, my brother and I have the uncanny ability to strike fear into the hearts of our visitors.

Occasionally, I hear someone begin to whisper to themselves after they have caught a glimpse of our shocking appearance. They appear to be quietly hoping that my brother and I are merely figments of an overactive imagination. However, when their glance returns to that small, grime-covered window, their nightmares are confirmed once more. My brother and I have not vanished. We have not disappeared. We are real. We remain in our cell, shivering, a mixture of fear, embarrassment, and anger coursing its way through our veins.

One woman became so frightened at the sight of us that her aura shifted. I don’t know how to explain it, but something within her changed. It was unlike anything I have ever seen. The colors

that surrounded her began to rapidly fluctuate. Everyone is surrounded by these colors, but they do not have the ability to shift. At least, not usually.

The longer she stood there, quaking in fear, the whiter the light encompassing her shoulders became. She clutched a string of ruby-colored beads within her quivering hands and began to whisper under her breath, praying to some unseen entity that my brother and I were someone's twisted idea of a joke. The more the woman prayed, the more pronounced the trembling of the rosary within her hands became.

Much like those that had come before her, the woman's eyes grew wide in horror as she came to the realization that my brother and I were indeed real. The woman's face shifted. Her features morphed as she began to accept the reality of our existence. It truly terrified her. I could see her soul begin to splinter. Its fragments glistened within her tear-filled eyes. Despite the commonly held belief that my brother and I are some sort of forlorn creatures worthy of a grand nightmare, we had not been conjured up within the depths of her imagination as she had hoped. We were real. We are composed of the same atoms as the woman and the other visitors that had come before her to gawk at the "freaks" that resided in 76 B.

Before I continue, it is imperative that I further elaborate on our ability to view

the auras of our visitors. You see, my brother and I can view the energy that surrounds people. It has something to do with the "reptilian coding" that has been implanted within our genetic makeup. I do not know the exact details, nor have the doctors provided any further information on the matter. In their eyes, the less we are told, the better.

As you will soon see, the doctors often refuse to inform my brother and I of the origins of our peculiar abilities. Unfortunately, this has become a theme that narrates much of our lives. My brother and I are frequently left guessing at what we are, or why we have been given the abilities that we have. Why do our eyes glow? Why can we see these auras, while the doctors cannot? Why do our claws click against the tile, while those of the doctors are much shorter, and far less sharp? These are just a few of the many questions that swirl about within the dark recesses of my subconscious.

Will these questions ever be answered? Probably not. I expect that most of these questions will continue to plague my mind until our last day within this facility. Will I die here? Will my brother and I ever be allowed to leave this awful enclosure? Only time will tell, although I find such freedom doubtful. The thought of being released from my cell feels like little more than a childish fantasy. We were

created here, and I fear that we may be terminated here. The entirety of my life will have taken place between these cursed walls.

My knowledge is limited to what the doctors have taught me. Since I am locked away within this cell, it is impossible for me to receive information from any external sources. The doctors possess a monopoly on my education. They simultaneously serve the role of warden and teacher. My brother and I are at their mercy, both physically and mentally. Therefore, much of the terminology used within their conversations far exceed the words that I have been taught.

With all of that being said, allow me to return to the narrative at hand. My mind is beginning to wander a great deal. It is imperative that I corral my meandering thoughts before I begin writing upon a tangent whose topics are far beyond that which I can truly comprehend.

My brother and I always tried to hide in the shadows. We desperately desired the shelter of the darkness. We would slink against the wall, trying to shield ourselves from the prying, judging eyes of those hateful, frightened visitors. However, we were never successful. Every attempt to mask our presence was in vain. Our eyes would always give us away. Even in the darkest corners of the room, our eyes could be seen. They glowed a vibrant golden hue, illuminat-

ing much of our morbidly disfigured bodies.

My brother and I had never viewed ourselves as morbid. We knew that we were different from the doctors and the other visitors. However, until our comprehension of the human language had grown enough for us to understand the implications of what was being said, we had no idea that everyone had become so dreadfully frightened of our appearance.

Maybe that is what everyone is truly afraid of. Maybe their fear is rooted not in our bizarre features and abilities, but in the simple fact that, while my brother and I may appear to be mostly humanoid from a structural sense, we are unquestionably different. Maybe it is this difference that everyone finds so frightening. Maybe there is something about the normal human mind that does not allow them to properly process the existence of beings whose anatomy deviates from that of the traditional human.

I need to pause for a moment to adjust my posture. I prefer to write with my legs crossed, but if I remain in this position for too long, the curved edges of my shimmering emerald scales begin to slice into the soft, olive-colored flesh of my upper thigh. As I sit here, frantically jotting my thoughts onto this scrap of paper, I can already feel the teasing sting of several small incisions. These cuts are beginning to bleed. The bleed-

ing is far from enough to endanger my life. I have bled much more during some of the macabre experiments that have been conducted to test the extent of my abilities. However, it is worth mentioning that a small pool is beginning to collect on the tile beneath me.

I have noticed that my blood is not the same crimson hue as that of the doctors. My blood is a golden color. It is the same shade of gold as my eyes. It glows in much the same manner, as well. Aside from the pain associated with its presence, my blood is quite a beautiful sight to behold. As I sit here, adjusting my posture, I cannot help but notice the glowing liquid that is beginning to flow through the countless cracks that criss-cross the floor's tiles. Much of the floor is beginning to glow. This glow has cast a faint golden light over about half of our cell. Even in its weakened state, this beautiful illumination is enough to curl the edges of my lips into a somber smile.

I have always wondered if the luminescent properties of my eyes and my blood are somehow connected. I have asked the doctors about this before, but without fail, they always brush off my questions. They act as if I am not worthy of understanding how my own body functions. Perhaps it is because even they are not truly aware of the answer, yet refuse to admit to such a lack of knowledge. Regardless of the reason, the doctors always storm off in

frustration, the bleached-white tails of their lab coats fluttering behind them as if mockingly waiving at the "freaks" in 76 B.

My brother and I have very similar names, which makes us feel close. This is important in such a frightening situation. The doctors call me Five Five Three. My brother's name is Five Five Four. The doctors say that our names match the symbols that have been stamped onto our chests. Three words. Three corresponding symbols.

Two of our symbols match, while a third is different. My third symbol curves twice, while my brother's third symbol is made of three straight lines that intersect with one another. I believe that my curving symbol is the "Three," while my brother's straight symbol is what the doctors are referring to as "Four." I cannot know this for sure, of course, and the doctors will not confirm this. They will not confirm much of anything.

Some of the older residents have much shorter names. There is an elderly gentleman living a few doors down from us. His name is Six. That is it. Six. Just Six. He does not even have a full name. Maybe they just refer to him by his last name or something. I am not sure.

Mr. Six was a normal man by most accounts. At first glance, he appeared to be little more than a graying man whose best years were long behind him. He

was likely in his late sixties or early seventies, although I cannot say for sure. His wings, however, are what set him apart from the rest of the facility's incarcerated inhabitants. Those majestic instruments of flight are what made this otherwise nondescript man something truly spectacular to behold.

I have never been presented with the opportunity to talk to Mr. Six. He is always heavily shackled when he passes by our small window to the outside world. His eyes, which have sunken deep into their sockets as a result of his advanced age, flash with life like a pair of polished sapphires. A thin layer of something the doctors call "stubble" outlines much of his lower face. A few of his teeth are chipped. Several others are lined with miniscule cracks that threaten to chip away at any moment.

I do not know where he goes, but I can hear him screaming a few minutes after he walks past our cell. His voice sounds panicked and pained, as if he is being tortured. A short time later, he passes by our window once more. The doctors are usually forced to carry Mr. Six after those horrendous bouts of screaming. He appeared limp, as if he were unable to support his own weight. His eyes were rarely open, giving the appearance that the haggard man had fallen asleep. Whatever they were doing to Mr. Six appeared to make him quite tired.

While I may have never gotten the

opportunity to speak to Mr. Six directly, I still enjoyed seeing him. He would smile at my brother and I whenever he passed by our cell. He is the only person that has ever smiled at us. Most people are terrified, but not Mr. Six. He always would always smile.

I found his smile quite frightening at first. I was not aware that our faces could twist into such a peculiar expression. I tried smiling for the first time that night. The corners of my mouth quivered. At first, the act of smiling felt alien to me. Foreign. After a moment, however, I felt a faint warmth arise within my heart. That mysterious warmth overcame the frigid darkness cast by the shadows of my cell. I like to smile now. So does Five Five Four. We try to smile as often as possible. That faint warmth makes our lives a little more bearable.

About a month ago, I heard the familiar sound of heavy chains dragging against the corridor's tile floor. Mr. Six walked by our door, held captive by his signature shackles. I had been seated near the door, eagerly awaiting Mr. Six's smile. This time, however, he did not smile. He closed one eye, then reopened it. The other eye remained open, despite the actions of its counterpart.

A moment later, as his frail figure disappeared beyond the edge of our door, a long, glowing feather fell from the top of one of his majestic wings. It floated to the floor with an unnatural

regality. I found myself transfixed on the feather as it fell. It was as if the feather was somehow lighter than the air itself. Its descent seemed calculated.

This had been no accident. The feather had not been shaken loose by a phantom gust of wind from a nearby air vent. No, this had been intentional. That feather had fallen with purpose. Mr. Six had wanted that feather to fall from its perch atop his wing.

The feather slid under the door, stopping an inch or two from where I had been seated with my legs crossed. The feather was warm, as if it had somehow been a living, breathing being, rather than something that had been discarded. Its light, mixed with that of our eyes, managed to further illuminate our darkened cell. Since then, my brother and I have slept with that feather positioned between us, out of sight of the doctors.

Until recently, that feather's warmth was all that helped my brother and I regulate our body temperatures during those frigid nights. My brother and I have discovered that we are reliant upon external heat to remain warm. From time to time, I have wondered how Mr. Six had already been aware of this. Perhaps he had overheard the doctors mention something about our reliance upon the outside world to remain warm.

The feather stopped glowing a few days ago. It does not produce warmth

anymore, and I do not understand why. Five Five Four and I have been constantly shivering since that loving light was extinguished. Five Five Four suggested that we may need to find a way to recharge the feather. We have discussed this a handful of times over the last several days, but none of our discussions have yielded any substantial results.

I have not seen Mr. Six recently, either. I miss his smile. His warmth. The last time I saw Mr. Six, he was struggling to free himself from his shackles. While this was a fairly common occurrence, this time was different. This time, Mr. Six's actions were far more powerful. Far more frenzied. He did not smile. There was no glowing warmth present as he passed our cell. His wings had flapped violently, sending glowing feathers cascading in all directions.

Amidst all of the commotion, one of Mr. Six's sharpened talons had scraped against the glass in our door's window, carving a slanted crucifix into the glass. The horrific sound of his talon scraping against the glass startled me and Five Five Four. Our eyes darted around the room for a moment, scanning the darkness in search of the source of that ear-splitting sound. My brother and I had been curled up in the corner, trying in vain to enjoy a temporary reprieve from the horrors of our incarceration.

That is what sleep was to us: an escape. Not a method of resting our

weary, scale-covered bodies, but a chance to escape from our incarceration. It did not matter that this escape only existed within our minds. Any escape, even one that was purely psychological in nature, was welcome.

During this terrifying ordeal, one of the doctors had told Mr. Six that his experiment was finally over, and that they had to “incinerate” him to maintain the secrecy of the operation. His frantic mannerisms had only increased at this revelation. Whether from excitement or fear I could not tell. Much of our view of the scene had been obstructed by Mr. Six’s massive wings.

Was Mr. Six finally being released from containment? Was he finally being given the opportunity to experience whatever wonders existed beyond these bland walls? Was he finally allowed to see the outside world? I hope so. I hope he is happy out there. Maybe he will be waiting for Five Five Four and myself. The doctors said that we get “incinerated” tomorrow, just like Mr. Six. Maybe then I will finally have the chance to talk to him.

I sure do miss Mr. Six’s smile, but I am only one day away from seeing him again! I am beginning to grow giddy with anticipation. I can feel excitement warming my soul once more. That is why I went ahead and wrote all of this today. I wanted to jot down everything so that I could tell Mr. Six and the others about how important his smile

was to Five Five Four and I. The kindness of Mr. Six is the only thing that kept us from feeling completely ostracized from the rest of the world.

I am aware that writing all of this down may appear to be a bit of an odd choice, given how much I have wanted to talk to Mr. Six. Allow me to explain. I tend to get tongue-tied at times. By writing down everything that I want to say, I can simply hand this letter to Mr. Six if I become too nervous to speak to him.

This is one of the reasons that the doctors taught me how to write. They wanted to make sure that I could communicate with them, even when I grew nervous. I know that I still have many more words to learn before I am able to properly communicate with the doctors. Much of what they say is still far beyond what I have been taught. How-

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have no prior knowledge to build from.

Furthermore, the doctors have blatantly refused to explain the meaning of this word. The short, chunky one named Mikey told Five Five Four and I that we would “find out soon enough.” After saying that, he had erupted into a bout of laughter mirroring that of a madman. Mikey turned his large iron key, which was covered in a thick layer of rust, just like he did every twelve hours or so. We had been locked into our shadowy cell once more. Mikey then turned and left. His laughter drifted away as he walked further down the corridor. Before long, he turned a corner and disappeared.

The sound of his booming laughter has been the soundtrack of my nightmares ever since. Even as I write this, his laughter still echoes throughout my mind. I cannot get that awful sound to leave. It taunts my soul. It feels as if that macabre melody has become a permanent feature of my subconscious.

I do not understand what he found to be so funny. Neither does Five Five Four. Why was Mikey laughing at the fact that my brother and I were finally going to be given the opportunity to meet Mr. Six? How could he find our freedom so amusing? I am unable to understand the logic associated with his obnoxious laughter.

Five Five Four is tapping his thick, black claws against the tile again. The sound is quite horrendous. The scraping of his jagged claws against the

cracking tile creates a shrill sound that emanates deep into my mind. It is one of the few sounds that can drown out Mikey’s terrifying laughter.

I do not think Five Five Four understands how much pain I feel because of the sound of his claws scraping against the tile. Perhaps, since they are his claws, his ears have grown accustomed to the sound. The doctors have told me that my ears are quite sensitive, so that may play a role as well.

With that being said, I need to finish this letter and try to get some sleep. The glow from my eyes is keeping Five Five Four awake. We need to be well-rested for our reunion with Mr. Six.

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The Journey

By Eleftheria Tsihli



OF all the places I've been, of all the journeys I've done, the one that will remain engraved in my memory is the days I spent in Pompare. Even now, while writing these words, by the fireplace in my office, I quail before the thought of what I had experienced, and my weakened body shivers at the reminiscence of the blasphemous events I bore witness. And now, just before I shut my eyes forever, I am still gridled by doubts whether those unbearable secrets should remain buried deep in my drained mind.

I was in the fourth decade of my life, having traversed the world three times, when my editor asked me to go to Pompare, a harbor in

the east of Thundac. My goal was a four-page feature-story for the traveling section Places and People, for which I'd been a writer for the last twelve years. Though I had visited the area during the first years of my career, I had never had the opportunity to travel to the remote harbor, whose geomorphological position kept it away from the curious sight of the tourists and travelers.

When I disembarked the clipper, my eyes filled with the bustling sight of the port, as that day, as in every second Thursday, coasters would come and unload the leather and the furs. Swearer sailors, merchants, furtive snatchers and children in rugs slipped in the containers, while I was trying to spot my guide and interpreter who was waiting for me, holding a sign with the newspaper's name on it.

I approached Dorne, who, upon recognizing me, told me in English: "It's not often so bustling, but two weeks ago there was a storm, and the ships couldn't reach the dock" I shook his hand, went on the carriage and we set off to the motel.

The first three days were pleasant, as I cherished the spicy soups, the blood sausages and the stew from tavern to tavern, sipping a local liquor that tasted a lot like the Greek ouzo and making small talk with companionable housewives and loose-lipped oldsters.

Yet, in this manuscript I do not intend

to share nothing else but the occurrences of that Sunday, May 19th of that year. Whoever reader is interested in the traveler's guide of Pompare, they can refer to the traveling section Places and People of the National Herald of the first week of July, which, undoubtedly, some collector must have kept. The rest of you that have a brave heart and a strong stomach to bare the events of the other, the eerie Pompare, can carry on reading.

Having a multi-year experience in travelling and places, I informed Dorne that I do not intend to waste my time in touristic shops and crowded attractions, but I was looking for the real Pomparian life, where its heart beat. Indeed, my interaction with the locals gave me a clear image of the everyday life, the hardships of the winter, the moil of the stockmen, the crumbling hands of the farmers and the wrinkled faces of the elderly. Most men did manual labor, in skin processing or in tobacco cultivation, while women did the housework and work in the fields, for their daily agricultural needs.

Dorne reassured me that on Sunday I would experience the heart of Pompare, in a feast for which the whole village had been preparing for nine years. "Myself, I haven't ever attended, as the last time it took place, I was in England for my studies, and I didn't return till nine months later. I am aware of a lot, though, since these traditions

are passed down over the generations. There is no Pomparian that doesn't know about Azoth's night. After all, it's what I do for a living'".

Dorne had attended the Nautical School in Birmingham, nonetheless he never embarked upon seafaring, as he was one of the few in the area that could speak English so fluently, and he was an asset for commercial firms and the post office. He would work as a guide only with wealthy travelers, or with reportorial expeditions, such as myself.

On Sunday, as soon as the sun started to set, we set off for Mount Nachtor. The path was rugged in places, but I had the opportunity to talk to the villagers, men and women, that comprised a group of one hundred and fifty people. At the edge of the Yellow Valley - or Valley of Madness, as the locals refer to it - I was able to espy the entrance. Though it seemed like a cave, Dorne avouched me that it was in fact quite shallow, rock shelter-type opening. The entrance lied bleak in the middle of the mountain, and the path leading to it was hardly visible. We had to walk one behind the other silently, as in our right side the vast cliffs of Nachtor crept over.

The night had fallen for good when we entered the cave. Although the ceiling was high, the atmosphere seemed claustrophobic, the opening small, from which the infinite stars

could not lighten the tenebrous darkness, while the dank atmosphere made breathing difficult. Dorne and I settled in an elevated niche, along with a few others and observed the preparations. The men piled the wood for the Great Pyre and the crowd fanned out along the damp walls and the caliginous limestone bulges of the cave, waiting for the Pyre. Suddenly, the mumble ceased and everybody stood still upon hearing the voice of Azothath, the Great Elder of Azoth. The feast had begun.

I was listening to Dorne interpreting the hymns of the Elder with pure interest and even more awe, as the Pyre was flaring up and brightening the austere faces of the crowd. Twenty men stood around it, while the Elder called Azoth and the Eight Old Ones with incomprehensible mumbles, to come and bring prosperity and strength to Pompare.

I already knew about the Old Myth of Pompare, since my young visit to Thundac, yet I was not aware of any ceremonial rite, apart from the names of the Old Ones. All the legends and the feats of Azoth, Cervus, Loch, Teveth came to life before my eyes, as the Elder kept projecting his voice, which was now resounding on the walls and echoed in my ears.

I was already too uneasy, as the crowd anticipated something that, if I had known I would witness, I would have turned down my editor's recommendation without second thought. The Elder

was now almost in ecstasy, the men were gibbering sinister prayers, and the women quailed behind the ancient stalactites. The Pyre had reached the charred ceiling when the Elder roared, showing towards me. The crowd went silent and I crawled deep into the stiff, merciless limestone. Half of the Guards approached us, taking three men from the niche next to ours. They passed right past us, and didn't even catch a glimpse of me, a foreigner, and I am forever grateful for that.

The three aghast men staggered among the Guards, whose daggers led them between the crowd and the Pyre. Then, they made room and let them stand there, shaking fearfully, as the Elder approached. My mind was working furiously as I was wondering what the fate of these wretched men would be. Would it be the Pyre that would take their life? Or the dagger? Perhaps they would be thrown to the Nachtor cliffs? Alas, nothing would brace me for what I would witness in a few moments.

The Elder undressed the men attentively, almost affectionately. Three women came near and gave them a drink, which I can now surely assume that it was a substance as close to a hallucinogen sedative as possible. In a few minutes, the guards placed the already overwhelmed by hallucinations men on three wooden structures. Their bodies were upright, yet they were unable to move, as their arms and legs

spread bound on the structures; two vertical posts for the body and legs, and a horizontal for the arms. They looked like sacrilegious crosses, a thought that I hastily deterred, as whichever resemblance to any other religions seemed blasphemous even to me, a non-theist.

Afterwards, Azothath the Elder approached the Pyre and summoned Azoth, the Lord of the Old Ones, to help him. Dorne strived to interpret awkwardly, pale and sweaty, and I had no more heart to ask him to stop, with tears in my eyes, as I had already realized what was about to happen. The dagger had already been in a forging heat when it cut the first man's chest. Woe is me, the cut wasn't deadly, no. The blade had penetrated merely an inch, when the Elder angled the dagger and with a sudden move, shoved it parallel to the skin and dragged it brusquely through the man's abdomen. He would not kill him. He would skin him.

My own mental sobriety, and not your welfare, kind reader, forbids me to thoroughly describe the skinning of the men. The reminiscence is already nauseating me, my mouth is drying, my stomach is getting upset and my face is burning from fever. My ears are buzzing by the howling of the men, and all I can say is that they were all alive while their foetid skins were tightened on a tall post and burning in the Pyre. The faces of the crowd were blazing in

ecstasy and women would faint at the sight of the three hapless living-dead, whom nature would not salvage with a quick death.

Alas, this was not the most hideous sight of the night. May the innocence and the carelessness of my hitherto life come back, but to no avail. I was bound to witness a sight that would obliterate my yet naive life perspective and would lade me with nameless fears and unspeakable nightmares, when I decided to strive and recount what I saw that spring night on Mount Nachtor in Pompare.

The Great Pyre was sparkling along with the skins that were burning along with the thick black blood and Azothath, almost fully in flames, whispered in an eldritch dialect a psalm that everybody listened to in delirium. Beside me, Dorne was hesitant, or unaware of the interpretation, yet I knew what it said and I sobbed like a toddler that struggles to verbalize their atrocious horror to their mother but finds no words to do so.

Then, Azothath went silent and stepped back, when the crowd peered to the opening. There, where the starry, moonless sky used to be, now the world blackened as never before. And this amorphous blackness entered the cave, slow and dank, like a thick decadent shadow. The believers, gazing humbly the ground crawled so as to become small, merest, for fear of Azoth the Old

One seeing them. I tearfully begged for the limestone to open up and swallow me in the Abyss of the cave, but in vain. Helpless, I went on gazing the blackness pulsating, until He reached above the Pyre. And then I saw His figure and His inside at the same time, like a transparent, deep-black sludge. He had nine disproportional extremities, like squamous legs-tentacles, that kept on changing shape. They were rifling in the Pyre and I realized that He was feasting on it. I wanted to lower my eyes, but my terror was inquisitive and I did the opposite. And then, I saw Him; His whole body pulsed and changed form, like a noisome mollusk. His whole body became a loathing eye and He saw me. I lowered my eyes in terror, alas, it was too late. The Pyre had flared up and His tentacles whipped its guts voraciously. He looked at me with His body-eye and I, powerless, glimpsed Him once more, screaming a voiceless howl. And His daemonic body became iridescent, with colors I had never seen before, and I hope I never will. For this iridescence was His thoughts, that pervaded my mind and, unable to do otherwise, I became the recipient of spectral communication with the Erst and the Evermore. For He led my stare to the opposite walls of the cave, commanding me to see. And I saw.

Instead of the shadows of the crowd flickering, I saw shadows of the same, thick substance of Azoth. And those

shadows were three-dimensional, like projections from another universe – a world which no human being should ever lay eyes on. For the shadows depicted humans, living-dead, part of an endless procession towards Nowhere, all together and each one by itself. For these living-dead were once people, and their souls were that appeared iridescent on the limestone walls. And, behold, I saw the future of human existence, bleaker than any other religion had ever foreseen. There was no Heaven or Hell, no Valhalla nor Nirvana and Samsara, only the infinite Darkness and the torment of the souls that would never find peace. And I knew, watching those poor dead souls, that this wasn't merely the fate of the few, but the eternal destination of humans, always and forever. The perpetual cortege towards Nowhere, full of agony, anguish and emptiness. And the relief would never come, for the cortege, ululating, was becoming longer and longer and the shadows were becoming more and more, yet, the death throes would never come to an end. And as my gaze was fixated upon the thick iridescent darkness, Azoth was whispering to me utterance of words, diabolical and unmentionable, about the end of Space and Time and the Long Path to Death.

I shut my eyes the moment the Old One ceased to be upon me, and I did not open them till a long time later, as

Dorne tried to bring me around. I can recall neither the ending of the ceremony, nor the way back to Pompare. My wretched mind recovered just as we approached the first houses, at the edge of the town. I do not have the slightest recollection of how I reached the hotel, or been led to my room. I do recall, thought, myself on my hands and knees praying all night to all the merciful gods I could remember, but no one took pity on me. The next morning, I woke up on my knees, beside the bed, with a half-empty bottle of liquor next to me.

On Monday afternoon, I boarded the passenger liner to Coundria. Dorne and I dried talked for a bit, then he awkwardly bade me farewell. Perhaps the heart of Pompare is something that should be left unseen by foreigners.

And now, that I shakily write those last words, my old body shudders at the thought of Death. For Death is not redemption, but an endless path of torment, where the human souls pulsate lifelessly and the bleak nothingness crams the darkness round them. And I know, that when my time soon comes, I will fight tooth and nail not to give up. For Azoth the Old One showed me the iridescent face of Death; and it is an Eye, depleted of life, full of agony and anguish, ready to devour man's hope into its stygian Darkness.

To Shorten The Way

by JB Granger

JB Granger is a recovering IT professional residing in North America with a partner and feral offspring. Gardening, reading and cooking are favorite activities, when not working in front of a flickering screen.

YOUR Royal Highness, Honorable Committee Members, Ladies and Gentlemen:

My name is Dr. Rosa Powell and I am the director of the Zidan Institute for Advanced Physics. It is a great honor to be standing before you today and accepting the Nobel Prize for Physics on behalf of my team. In truth, this prize doesn't belong to us but to our mentor, Dr. Joseph Zidan. It was his efforts that gave humanity access to our solar system and would one day give us the stars. It has been decades since the events in July of that year and the posthumous publication of the "Two Papers," but interest in his life has only grown. Unfortunately, Dr. Zidan didn't live to see this day but I and his other students will continue to carry out his work and his legacy.

The events in July and their impact on our civilization have left an indelible mark but they started in a very ordinary way. I experienced them during a vacation to the earthquake-prone western



region of North America as our hotel shook from a series of small quakes in the early hours of July 8. Only days later, rumors started spreading through the science community that the earthquakes had not seemed to be natural--perhaps even the work of a new and exotic weapon. But since human brains often like to see patterns even in chaos, I dismissed these rumors.

Furthermore, during the usual post-quake analysis stage, several geologists reasoned that the quakes followed a pattern too regular to be natural. At the same time, multiple astronomers, astrophysicists, and space agencies were analyzing reports of similar quakes occurring on other bodies in the Solar System, including the settlements on Luna. By measuring the delays between the various quakes and where they occurred, an inescapable conclusion was reached: this was a System-wide gravitational disturbance that had never been observed before. Even stranger, the disturbance originated from within the System but not from areas of human settlement. I am ashamed to admit that I failed to connect these events to our own research performed under the tutelage of Dr. Zidan.

Among many practical experiments over the years, our department was able to launch several mini-probes into space with grants Dr. Zidan had obtained from both private and government donors. They were not designed

to return to Earth and continued to steadily deliver telemetry via the Deep Space Network. Occasionally, we assigned a new graduate student to check the probes for anything interesting but during the disarray after Dr. Zidan's passing the data went unchecked for a long time.

Several months after the July quakes, a curious member of our department was surprised to learn that some of these probes had shifted their location in a dramatic fashion before one of them went offline entirely. We called in a favor from an old friend working with an off-world telescope on Luna who helped us locate our wayward machine and reestablish connectivity. Neither the telescope results nor the new telemetry data made sense any longer, but we were reluctant to assign limited department resources to chase an old experiment. Instead, we disclosed our results in a conference talk hoping to spark others' interest in pursuing this research. Much to our surprise, we were contacted by the Poseidon task force that was coordinating the analysis of the July events.

When I finally sat down with scientists who were working with the task force, it had been almost a year since the initial events. As we shared our data, it became clear that the location of the probes overlapped with the estimated origin of the gravitational disturbances. We were lucky that the original plans for

the space probes were among Joseph's papers and after reanalyzing them, it turned out that the probes had carried additional payloads that none of us knew about. Reverse engineering the payloads took several years of painstaking effort, but it wasn't until we found what became known as the "Two Papers" that our findings and the data collected by the taskforce started to make sense.

I will be honest with you--when I read the "Two Papers" originally, I thought they were a hoax or an elaborate joke, although one was written by a physicist well versed in quantum mechanics. But Dr. Zidan was never known for his sense of humor and the task force assigned multiple world-renowned physicists to try making sense out of them. The first paper described a novel and ultra-efficient space propulsion system that was orders of magnitude faster than any other technology known at the time. The slim paper combined with the experimental data finally gave our species the ability to travel within the Solar System. But the second paper really blew our minds--it described a new theory of physics which pointed directly to practical teleportation and faster-than-light space travel. As described in the task force's final report, Dr. Zidan's secret payloads designed to test this theory were believed to have caused the System-wide gravitational disturbances, otherwise known as "The

July events."

In the past few decades, fast and efficient space propulsion has allowed humanity to expand throughout the Solar System. We are now truly a multi-planet civilization and some think that the number of people living off-Earth will exceed those residing on the planet's surface within a century or two. Faster-than-light travel and teleportation research remains restricted and carried out in a forbidden zone somewhere in the Oort Cloud. Nevertheless, our hope is that this research bears fruit soon and we may travel to see the light of other stars in person within our lifetimes.

You may ask, who was Dr. Joseph Zidan? The man who made human expansion into space possible started from humble beginnings. His people sailed Earth, but they did not sail on water. Instead, they explored the endless desert sands for thousands of years before man discovered spaceflight. They travelled across the desert, pitching their tents wherever they stopped; never maintaining a permanent settlement but circling around, keeping just at the edge of civilization. As the borders of the deserts were settled, they retreated inward and when the deserts expanded, they would follow. Somewhere in the desert, Joseph was born to an unknown family under an unknown name. Despite extensive research by many historians, journalists and govern-

ments, no reliable trace of his family has ever been found.

The one person in his family he would often speak of was his aunt. During some of the sandstorms, when the desert howled outside their tents and there wasn't much to be done but to wait out the weather, she gathered the children--and even some adults--into her large tent. She kept their minds off the wailing winds by sharing fantastic stories of caliphs, djinns, wise men and talking animals. Among Joseph's papers, we found many of these stories written down meticulously from memory in addition to others he'd picked up throughout his life.

His family must have been well-off for he'd sometimes shared childhood memories involving many animals, tents, women and children. How much contact they had with the outside world is not certain, but they'd clearly maintained a tenuous link as some had possessed guns and satellite communication units. Sometimes they'd been employed as guides by those who sought to travel in the desert--whether for science, trade or tourism--but they did not linger or interact closely with the people they escorted. During these trips or occasional trading stops at villages near the edges of the desert must have been when Joseph caught short glimpses of the wider world that lay beyond the sands.

Eventually, a thirst for knowledge

drove him to leave the desert and start his journey into our world. We don't know how or when he left, but it must have been when he was a teenager. He probably slipped away from his family during a trading stop then made his way to an Arabian campus of a well-known North American university. There, he boldly walked into the admissions office and begged to be accepted. We don't know the details of his travels beforehand for he'd seldom spoke of them, and when he had, his face revealed an expression of pain. Many have tried to retrace his journey prior to university but just as it was with his family, nothing reliable was ever found.

About ten years ago, one of the media agencies from Luna interviewed an elderly woman who'd worked as a secretary at the university's admissions office at the time. She clearly remembered Joseph but had never connected the dust-covered young man with the now-famous physicist. She told the interviewer that he'd been coming for months but was rejected many times due to lack of an identity chip and his scraggly appearance hadn't helped his case. As the story of the strange boy spread, Dr. Wang, one of the guest faculty members had taken an interest in him and started talking to Joseph on a regular basis. He would also sneak out books from the library for Joseph to read, and over time become more and more impressed with the teenager. Dr.

Wang had once happened to mentor a senior government official and he now used this connection to arrange for an identity chip and a government scholarship for the young man. That is when he took on the name Joseph Zidan.

Joseph entered the university as a teenager and Dr. Wang continued to mentor him throughout his college career. They could often be found in the school's library arguing over a book or walking outside in late afternoons when the air cooled off. However, it took a long time to convince Joseph to settle on a particular major for he was torn among the many subjects. He kept alternating his focus between his undergraduate studies in history and mythology, and his master's degree in math. Dr. Wang was a world-renowned authority in graph theory and tried to cajole the boy to continue pursuing math, but Joseph eventually gravitated towards physics. Nevertheless, he continued to maintain an obsessive interest in other subjects, particularly those unrelated to the hard sciences. During the last year of Joseph's graduate studies when he was close to completing his PhD in physics, Dr. Wang passed away during an influenza outbreak. The sudden loss of the man who was like a father to him shook him to the core and he disappeared from the university for several months.

When he came back, the change in him was startling. Contemporaries

recounted that he no longer had the easygoing spirit of youth and instead had become a brooding, gaunt and quiet man, looking well older than his age. Since he'd returned right before his thesis deadline, all kinds of rumors about him had circulated: that he'd written his thesis within the span of twenty-four hours on a beach somewhere, that he had an older brother even smarter than him somewhere in the desert who'd helped him, that he hadn't bothered showing up for the thesis defense, or that he'd blackmailed his advisor into giving him the PhD in return for listing him as a co-author. Most of this wasn't even remotely true. Members of his thesis review committee have been interviewed many times and indicated that his defense followed standard practice. The one fact that could not be denied was that the thesis itself had rocked the physics world. The paper challenged some of the basic foundations of quantum mechanics and would have repercussions for years to come. And yes--Dr. Alexandra Volkova, his thesis advisor, was listed as a co-author of his paper; although that's probably the only thing anyone remembers about her today.

After his graduation, Joseph's professional future became one of the most discussed bits of gossip in the physics world. Most thought he would go on to some of the premier physics departments on Terra or perhaps the recently

opened university on Luna. His thesis drew comparisons to Einstein, Bohr and other great physicists from the past and hinted at many potential new discoveries to come. The newly minted Dr. Zidan remained silent until much to everyone's surprise, he took a research position at a relatively unknown college in South America. Not only did the institution agree to grant him life-long tenure, they also dedicated a brand-new physics department solely focused on research. He remained there for the rest of his life, never teaching, speaking or publishing on his own but building a welcome place for others.

Over time, he attracted a steady cadre of graduate students, including me--many of whom are present in this hall today. He encouraged original thinking which was reflected in much of the research led by his students who pursued different topics than other researchers. He didn't teach and was often away on travel but the rest of the time he was always available to help or answer questions. He occasionally secured grants and over the years we travelled to particle accelerators, nuclear reactors and even space ports to perform practical experiments. In addition to his office at the university, his home was always open to his current and former students. We spent many hours in his living room or backyard arguing over physics theories long after the food disappeared while he sat back

and enjoyed our banter. In a way, we were his large and dysfunctional family, and he guided our research with the care and patience of an experienced parent.

His passing was a shock to both our department and his students. He had no family and his will designated the university as the recipient of both his personal property and an extensive research archive. His death caused quite a bit of chaos in our department and as a result, his papers sat untouched on the library shelves until the Poseidon task force rediscovered them. Since that discovery, we have been privileged to secure funding to both publish his research and continue to offer a home for unusual physics at our institute which now carries his name.

The position we find ourselves in today--decades after those events--is a remarkable place. Humans are rapidly colonizing the Solar System at a pace that was previously unimaginable. Experiments being conducted at the far edges of the System provide hope for billions that we will shortly become a species with the ability to cross the immense gulf between stars and galaxies. All of these achievements are a result of Dr. Zidan's research--something he toiled at most of his life in isolation and loneliness. The obvious question many have asked is why? Why did one of the greatest scientists in the history of mankind spend the majority

of his life in professional isolation at a remote and unremarkable institution?

After going through his papers, we could clearly see that Joseph was very unusual for a scientist, especially for a physicist. For starters, most of his research wasn't on physics. But that wasn't what surprised us the most. You see, we have different backgrounds but we all share an unshakable belief that the science we study defines the world and the formulas we scribble on chalkboards or tap into our tablets truly describe the universe around us.

Joseph did not share that belief; rather, he was a heretic to our craft. He did not believe in physics or math as things that define our universe. At his core was an unshakable belief in magic and myth as reality. He was convinced that magical phenomena had solid, physics-based explanations and spent most of his life trying to find and prove them. In some ways, he had more in common with the alchemists of old than the scientists of today. Things such as magic wands, spells, telepathy, teleportation, talking animals, ghosts, djinns, etc.--all were meticulously documented in his notes as simple truth while the basic foundations of physics and math always remained open questions. He never attended physics conferences, but he did travel extensively, not for physics but to research history and myth. Sometimes I imagine that in his heart, he was still a small boy sitting

in his aunt's tent and raptly listening to her stories of magic, utterly convinced they were all true. As an adult, he went a step further and attempted to prove them.

The space experiments he launched and the July events that followed were results of Dr. Zidan's research into the concepts of teleportation that he'd originally encountered in fairy tales. These included *tay al-Ard*, *Kfitzat haDerech*, the seven-league boots, and other similar magical concepts. Some may imagine the mockery and derision Joseph would have received had he announced these results as proof of something that can only be described as old myths. Others may lament the immense intellect wasted on pursuing folly.

How do I choose to remember Dr. Joseph Zidan? Do I want to remember him as a brilliant scientist led astray by myths, one who squandered his immense potential on folly? Or merely as someone with eccentric interests? Or perhaps I simply want to remember him as my mentor--one who patiently helped me and so many others as we struggled during our graduate studies. Standing here today--with what could rightfully be described as his Nobel Prize--I can declare my choice. No matter how my mentor lived his life, I hope we will remember him based on what he accomplished: as the man who shortened our way to the stars.

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